

Growing Older, Growing Wiser

Theme Essay

Our population is at a new stage; more people are living longer. Barely a generation ago, it was not uncommon for a grandparent to pass away in her 60s, but now life expectancy puts that age in the mid-80s. It is perhaps a mixed blessing, for though medical science and diet and technology can provide the resources for a longer life, not all aspects of being older are pleasant. While we live longer, we still face debilitating, incurable diseases such as cancer, Alzheimer's, and dementia. Indeed, along with Mary Clearman Blew in her novel *Balsamroot*, we wonder what happens when the mind starts to wear out? While modern living has provided many physical comforts, our society is not prepared to care for the elderly as evidenced by the number of homes for the aged, separate facilities where elderly are placed for care and treatment, away from friends, family and community. Age discrimination against senior citizens is a documented fact.

In contrast is the idea that only through living and the experiences that come with it can we become wise. Wisdom is not a certificate or a degree, and it is probably true that any 80 year-old will have more wisdom than a twenty-year-old college graduate. Wisdom borne of age and experience is a resource for our society in general and personal terms. As Bessie Delany says, "There's a saying: Only little children and old folks tell the truth." And for some, life goes on as it always has, never seeming to change in any significant way. "No matter how old you get, you don't feel old," writes Wallace Stegner.

This theme, *Growing Older, Growing Wiser*, addresses these issues. On the one hand is the fear and the "inconvenience" of growing older; on the other is the revealed wisdom and confidence of age. Each novel in this series speaks to us as individuals who are part of the growing number of aging and elderly in this country, whether we ourselves are elderly or whether we have parents, grandparents or other relatives who are aging. Reading, reflection and discussion will help address issues such as how we might proceed into this new social structure, where and how we live, and how we relate to the rest of our family and society.

"Growing Older, Growing Wiser" was developed in June, 2000, by Dr. Jeff Fox, assistant professor of English and Japanese and currently (2008) Executive Vice President/Chief Academic Officer of College of Southern Idaho. Book selections were made by the 1998 Idaho Let's Talk About It theme development committee.

Discussion Prompts

Use the following as discussion prompts for the theme of Growing Older, Growing Wiser.

1. While discussing his novel *Crossing To Safety*, Wallace Stegner notes that, “The older you get, the more the relation between past and present grows on you, because you have more history to look at... No matter how old you get, you don’t feel old. You’re still the same guy inside, and so there is a continuity there, within yourself.” (Stegner: *Conversations on History and Literature* by Wallace Stegner and Richard W. Etulain xiii).

2. On page 149 of *The Memory of Old Jack*, Berry writes of the reaction to the news of Jack’s death.

As he [Mat] told them he felt the change. He felt it come over them all, as quiet and complete as a night of snow. A landmark that they had all depended on had fallen, and a strangeness came between them and the country. Their minds had already begun to change and things would no longer be as they had been.

Mat felt the change upon himself. Now he was the oldest, and the longest memory was his. Now between him and the grace stood no other man. From here on he would have to find the way for himself.

4. In *Having Our Say*, Bessie says, “When you get real old, honey, you realize there are certain things that just don’t matter anymore. You lay it all on the table. There’s a saying: Only little children and old folks tell the truth.” (pgs. 203–204).

5. Morrie Schwartz writes about being seventy–something:

The truth is, part of me is every age. I’m a three–year–old, I’m a five–year–old, I’m a thirty–seven–year–old, I’m a fifty–year–old. I’ve been through all of them, and I know what it’s like. I delight in being a child when it’s appropriate to be a child. I delight in being a wise old man when it’s appropriate to be a wise old man. Think of all I can be! I am every age, up to my own. (qtd. in Albom, pgs.120–121)

6. On death and its effect on those left behind, Morrie says,

As long as we can love each other, and remember the feeling of love we had, we can die without ever really going away. All the love you created is still there. All the memories are still there. You live on—in the hearts of everyone you have touched and nurtured while you were here... Death ends a life, not a relationship. (qtd. in Albom, page 174)

7. Morrie speaks of aspects of living a meaningful life:

The culture we have does not make people feel good about themselves... So many people walk around with a meaningless life. They seem half-asleep, even when they are doing things they think are important... The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning. (qtd. in Albom, pgs. 42–43)

8. In *Balsamroot*, Blew considers the dementia her Aunt Imogene is facing. She writes:

What happens when the mind starts to wear out? I imagine the process as a dissolving of the layers between memories, like a wad of old photographs beginning to grow together... Or I imagine the process as the erasure of the line between past and present, until all experience exists simultaneously... Or I imagine my aunt falling through the hole in her mind. Coming to consciousness again in another time and place, in the smell of alkali and sagebrush, with nowhere to get out of the sun, with no sense of the future (pgs. 14–15).

In what ways do these ideas relate to “Growing older, growing wiser?”

9. In Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*, Hagar is visiting the old age care facility (against her will), she has a conversation with a Mrs. Steiner who lives there.

‘Do you get used to life?’ she says. ‘Can you answer me that? It all comes as a surprise. You get your first period, and you’re amazed—I can have babies now—such a thing? When the children come, you think—Is it

mine? Did it come out of me? Who could believe it? When you can't have them any more, what a shock—It's finished—so soon?

I peer at her, thinking how peculiar that she knows so much.

'You're right. I never got used to a blessed thing.' (page 104)

How does she mean this? What effect does this have on our lives?

General Website on Aging and American Society

- *American Society on Aging:* http://www.asaging.org/ASA_Home_New5.cfm
- *Administration on Aging:* <http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/>
- *National Council on the Aging (NCOA):* <http://www.ncoa.org/>
- *American Federation for Aging Research (AFAR):* <http://www.afar.org/>
- *American Health Assistance Foundation:* <http://www.ahaf.org/>
- *National Institute on Aging:* <http://www.nih.gov/nia/>
- *Aging issues:* <http://www.flyingsolo.com/>
- *Dementia resource page (Washington U at St. Louis):*
<http://www.biostat.wustl.edu/ALZHEIMER/submit.html>
- *Aging in a Social Context:* <http://www.gl.umbc.edu/~vdotte1/>